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AUTHOR Congalton, David
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ABSTRACT

Presented by one of two debaters from the United States who participated in a debate tour of England under the sponsorship of the Speech Communication Association, this paper discusses the tour in terms of three major goals: cultural exchange, developing dialogue skills, and educational exchange. In addition, it comments on the ability of American debaters to aid in the establishment and expansion of British debate unions, the challenge for American debaters to adjust to a new system of debate where the emphasis is in different areas, the opportunity for American debaters to engage in dialogue directly with an audience, and the logical extension of the educational commitment to offer varied forensic opportunities. (TJ)

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**Academic Debate: An International Perspective
Focusing On Great Britain**

by

David Congalton

**Concordia College
Moorhead, Minnesota**

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David Congalton, an undergraduate varsity debater for Eastern Illinois University, was selected for the Great Britain tour in May, 1975. Along with Thomas Hozduk of the University of Southern California, Congalton participated in the 1976 Great Britain tour during January, February, and March.

Congalton and Hozduk participated in approximately 17 audience debates in Northern Ireland, England, and Wales. The topic for debate was selected by the host school from a suggested list of ten topics offered by Congalton and Hozduk. Audiences, composed primarily of college students and faculty, ranged in size from 10 to 650.

For the majority of debates, the standard format was to allow each speaker a constructive and rebuttal speech intertwined with speeches from the floor. No cross-examination of speakers was allowed.

The opportunity to participate in a debating tour abroad has, by nature, been restricted to a small percentage of debaters and coaches. Though representing a wide cross section of the American forensic community, the program is limited by economic forces in providing an opportunity for all those who seek the challenge. At the same time, there appears to be a scarcity of scholarly research and publication involving the international debate tours; few attempts have been made to examine these tours in regards to purpose, activities, and possible advantages. These two factors underscore the identity problem often associated with the tours - very few speech professionals are aware of what is actually involved when American debaters and coaches visit foreign countries.

In this paper, the focus is specifically on the Great Britain tour. Debate has long been an important tradition in Britain: Images of Parliament and the Oxford Debate Union come quickly to mind. In the last several years, the visiting tour of American debaters has added to that tradition in many important ways. By utilizing some of the stated goals of the SCA tour, analysis will be provided in an attempt to explain and evaluate the British tour.

Cultural Exchange

One of the major stated goals of the program is to "broaden the scope of educational and cultural exchange by providing a channel for the exchange of ideas." One of the major accomplishments of the 1976 tour was to help develop and expand new debate programs at British universities. When an American thinks of British debate, it is likely that images of Oxford and Cambridge will appear. As schools with long traditions in both academics and debate, these two schools have dominated the British debate circuit. But beyond these two fine schools, there were struggling debate unions at Leeds, Reading, Norwich, and elsewhere where a union president was considered

lucky if 10 members were present at meetings. The presence of the American debating team often helped to ease that situation. Using the American debaters as a novel attraction, debate unions in areas like Reading, Nottingham, and Bradford were able to draw large crowds - people who had never been exposed to debate before. Further contact with these schools revealed that a great many of these students remained involved in the activity. The tour was thus often successful in help starting up or sustaining debate unions living in the shadows of more prestigious schools.

Developing Skills of Dialogue

A major premise of the SCA tour is that "dialogue is the preferred means for resolving conflict." The dialogue surrounding the 1976 tour - often humorous, often heated, provided the American debaters with several unique challenges.

The British approach to debate centers around the parliamentary system. Emphasis is not placed on research and evidence in British speakers as much as delivery is. The British debater will tend to argue mostly in generalities, make serious attempts to be humorous, and focus mostly on capturing the support of the audience.

The 1976 American team members each had several years of high caliber varsity debate for experience. Such experience had provided Horzduk and Congalton a chance to develop their skills in research, organization, and structure of argument, but little exposure to the audience debating they would do in Britain. Thus, the biggest challenge for the Americans was the attempt to adopt to the new debating environment they found at the British universities. The Americans were expected to develop a good rapport with audience members, develop a few general and asserted arguments, and endure a series of ad hominem attacks.

While many American debaters and coaches would have reservations against such rhetorical debating styles, the debates actually provided an opportunity to test effective speaking and debating skills. Without stacks of evidence, plastic-coated blocks, sheafs of judging philosophies, and flow sheets crammed with 85 different issues, the Americans were left to rely on their delivery style and reasoning ability to win the support of the audience.

The mere presence of an audience was, in itself, an important factor. American debaters, trained with arguing before a single, often, expressionless, judge now confronted a large vastly interested audience. Hacklers were commonplace. More importantly, most debaters allowed the audience to become involved which often added a different perspective on the issues being argued.

It was through such open dialogue that serious debating and interaction was convened on diverse topics such as marijuana legalization, euthanasia, women's rights, Northern Ireland, and leadership capabilities of Great Britain. Both the audience and the debaters seemed to benefit from the discussion.

Educational Exchange

A third important goal of the tour is "to facilitate exchange of educational thinking and ideas among the countries involved." As it soon became evident, the education systems of the U.S. and Great Britain are vastly different. In Great Britain, it is only a small percentage of students that go on to pursue college degrees. This educational perspective is also reflected in their approach to debate.

There are no "debate coaches" to be found at the college level in Great Britain. The debate unions are totally student organized and directed.

At speaking contests, honored guests and other lay judges are used to render decisions. To take a "flow sheet" is considered an inexcusable crutch. The major goal of these unions appeared to be preparing students for government service and many debates actually involve student debaters teaming up with older government officials. Given this situation, it is not surprising when visiting British debaters poke fun at the American style of debate - such heavy use of jargon, evidence, etc. is very new to them. The tour allowed debaters a chance to see how debate functions under a different educational environment.

A final aspect of the educational exchange philosophy is strictly a personal observation. Forensic educators have always been committed to providing students with as many diverse opportunities as possible - CEDA, NDT, NIET, the Interstate Oratory Contest are clear examples. A chance to debate in Great Britain is an important educational experience that no debater should pass up. Some debaters view pressure as being in an octa-fina' elimination round - try comparing that to those debaters who have faced a crowd of Northern Irish students to debate the merits of Northern Ireland!

Overall Conclusions

Both the United States and Great Britain seem to agree that debate is an important part of a civilized society and that debate is important also to education. However, the comparison appears to stop there. British debate plays off the reactions of an audience in a system that is designed by students and non-debate professionals. Yet in these differences lie the strengths of the American tour. The important aspects of the tour can be summarized as:

- 1) The ability of American debaters to aid in the establishment and expansion of various British debate unions.

- 2) The challenge for American debaters to adjust to a new system of debate where the emphasis is in different areas.
- 3) The opportunity for American debaters to engage in dialogue directly with an audience and other relevant members of the host schools.
- 4) A logical extension of the educational commitment to offer varied forensic opportunities.